

VZCZCXRO8997  
PP RUEHTRO  
DE RUEHAS #1559/01 2981058  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH  
P 251058Z OCT 07  
FM AMEMBASSY ALGIERS  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4736  
INFO RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 2378  
RUEHMD/AMEMBASSY MADRID 8654  
RUEHRB/AMEMBASSY RABAT 1980  
RUEHTU/AMEMBASSY TUNIS 6834  
RUEHTRO/AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI  
RUEHNC/AMEMBASSY NOUAKCHOTT 6070  
RUEHNM/AMEMBASSY NIAMEY 1325  
RUEHBP/AMEMBASSY BAMAKO 0273  
RUEHCL/AMCONSUL CASABLANCA 3098  
RHMFISS/HQ USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ALGIERS 001559

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/24/2017

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [KPAO](#) [AG](#)

SUBJECT: LOCAL ELECTIONS 2007: THE HEAVY HAND OF THE  
INTERIOR MINISTRY

REF: ALGIERS 1527

Classified By: Ambassador Robert Ford; reasons 1.4 (b), (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: At the same time as Interior Minister Yazid Zerhouni is making public statements about the government's commitment to a fair and neutral electoral process to urge greater turnout, the role of his ministry in micro-managing slates of candidates from all parties has been significant. Embassy contacts from ruling and opposition parties alike speak of their astonishment at the degree to which a "hidden hand" has rejected candidates alleged to be criminals or security risks, and otherwise publicized mysterious slates of candidates markedly different from the ones they submitted at the October 9 deadline. Opposition parties such as the Front des Forces Socialistes (FFS) have raised their complaints in the media and to Prime Minister Belkhadem, but parties in the ruling coalition are also scratching their heads at the unprecedented level of governmental involvement in the run-up to the November 29 elections. END SUMMARY.

-----  
ZERHOUNI - THE PUBLIC FACE  
-----

¶2. (U) Leading Arabic-language daily El Khabar reported on October 22 remarks made by Interior Minister Yazid Zerhouni at the opening of a government-sponsored youth conference in Algiers. Zerhouni stated that the government was "committed to neutrality before and during the electoral process" and was sought to maximize voter participation in the vote. Zerhouni promised a campaign of "awareness and consciousness" to promote a meaningful election process.

-----  
INTERIOR BOOTS OUT CANDIDATES  
-----

¶3. (C) Abdelmajid Menasra, vice president of the Islamist (Muslim Brotherhood) Society for Peace Movement (MSP), one of the three parties of the ruling coalition, told Poloff on October 22 that Algerian electoral law provides for three justifications to disqualify a candidate from seeking elected office: a criminal record; bankruptcy; and participation in the war for independence on the French side. The police are responsible for vetting all slates of proposed candidates in Algeria's 1541 local electoral districts to determine if criminals or other security risks must be disqualified. Menasra said that before the previous local elections in

2002, rejecting candidates was unheard of. Some were rejected by the police in 2002, he said, but the numbers have gone through the roof in 2007, with some 500 out of 10,000 MSP candidates nationwide rejected by the police "for security reasons," even though some of those candidates were former senators and members of parliament. Opposition FFS party head Karim Tabbou told Poloff on October 17 that, across the country, ten entire slates of FFS candidates at the wily level were rejected, largely for bureaucratic reasons but also with "unexplained security justifications."

14. (C) Under the Charter of National Reconciliation, former members of the now-banned Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) are also banned from participation in politics. This year, some former FIS members have attempted to find new political life on the slates of parties such as the MSP or the opposition an-Nahda. Journalist Samar Smati of the French-language newspaper Liberte told us on October 21 that she knew of "a dozen or so" former FIS members whose names had been submitted on candidate slates for the local elections, only to be rejected by the police. Menasra said that three former FIS members were rejected from the MSP lists, but that the police were "taking advantage" of their mandate to weed out criminals and Islamists to populate the lists with candidates of their choosing. According to Tabbou, when he presented FFS complaints to Prime Minister Belkhadem (reftel) on October 17, Belkhadem seemed "only recently apprised" of electoral complaints. He had, however, a dossier on his desk from the interior ministry that included extensive details on the rejected candidates with statistics that Tabbou said were "more accurate and more complete than the party's own."

-----  
ALGIERS 00001559 002 OF 003

SOME APPEAL AND WIN BUT IT'S TENUOUS  
-----

15. (C) Candidates struck from the lists by the Interior Ministry have the right to appeal the decision to the courts. Lawyer Fatma Benbrahem told us October 23 that she was representing in court three candidates from the FLN. In each of the three cases, she claimed, the Interior Ministry claimed the candidates had criminal records but in fact no criminal conviction of any kind existed. She was hopeful that the judges would, therefore, decide in favor of her clients, but she cautioned that the judges - who work directly for the Ministry of Justice - are not independent. A judge is always nervous that if he decides the wrong way he'll be transferred from Algiers to the court in Tamanrasset (in the extreme south of Algeria's Sahara desert).

16. (C) Interestingly, no party is immune from Interior Ministry intervention. The coalition member RND party, no Islamist or opposition hotbed, also had more than 700 candidates nationwide removed from its candidate slates, RND Central Committee member Seddik Chihheb told Ambassador October 24. Chihheb noted that never before had the Interior Ministry been so pervasive in going through lists. Nonetheless, the RND was appealing to the courts on many of its cases and winning a few. For example, he said, four candidates removed from the provincial legislature candidate list in Boumerdes provinces regained their places with a court order on October 23. Chihheb assessed that the candidate registration process has serious flaws but there is still some room to push for a wider opening and more genuine competition in elections. There is an opening, but if Algeria's political system does not liberalize more quickly or it will be discredited entirely, he concluded.

-----  
"WE ARE THE MASTERS OF FRAUD"  
-----

17. (C) Houria Bouhired, until early 2007 a member of parliament representing Algiers' conservative and

historically volatile Bab el-Oued neighborhood for the ruling FLN party, told Poloff October 21 that the FLN was deeply divided and was being exploited by the ruling elite as a front to legitimize electoral tampering. On October 22, current FLN Senator and former Ambassador Mohieddin Ammimour painted the same picture, describing to Ambassador an FLN base that was rejecting the centralized arbitration of party leader Prime Minister Belkhadem in favor of electoral disputes resolved locally, often with candidates pushed by the Army and security services. Bouhired described the local FLN list presented in the Algiers district of Sidi M'hamed as one that, when made public, was completely different than the one the district FLN office had submitted. Under the pretense of security concerns, a rejected candidate on that list was replaced with a known former prostitute, according to Bouhired. Bouhired said that similar tampering led her to withdraw her candidacy for re-election to the parliament in the spring. At the conclusion of his October 22 meeting with Poloff, MSP's Menasra smiled and shook his head. "We are the masters of fraud," he said, noting that "You would not believe what goes on at the local level."

-----  
COMMENT  
-----

18. (C) Zerhouni's stated desire to manage a fair and transparent electoral process is inconsistent with the degree of control his ministry is exercising over candidates and their parties. The extraordinary level of police involvement in choosing candidates has not been lost on officials from competing parties. Embassy contacts across party lines were unanimous in acknowledging that, now more than ever, Algeria's top leaders -- "le Pouvoir" -- are organizing the election, deciding who runs and who does not, and ultimately determining the results it wants. Instead of spurring the greater turnout Zerhouni claims to support, the degree of control risks further alienating a population that indicated in May it thought the election process was a waste of time designed to legitimize an inevitable outcome. "Why should I vote?" an Embassy driver shrugged while stuck in Algiers

ALGIERS 00001559 003 OF 003

traffic on October 22, "we all know the result and it won't lower the price of potatoes anyway."  
FORD